

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9011

INFO CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

USSAG NAKHON PHANOM THAILAND

C O N F I D E N T I A L PHNOM PENH 1279

EXDIS

FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: MOPS EAID CB

SUBJECT: SMALL CONVOY SAILS FOR PHNOM PENH JANUARY 21

REF: PHNOM PENH 1182

1. A TWO-BARGE CONVOY PULLED BY THE MOST POWERFUL TUGS AVAILABLE AND FULLY PROTECTED BY ARMORED SHIELDS DEPARTED VIETNAMESE BORDER LATE THIS AFTERNOON TO RUN THE GAUNTLET. AT THE LAST MINUTE CINC/FANK GENERAL SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ, COMMANDER KHMER NAVY ADMIRAL SARENDY AND COMMANDER KHMER AIR FORCE BRIG. GENERAL EA CHHONG WANTED TO DELAY CONVOY AGAIN BECAUSE NAVY HAD BEEN UNABLE TO OCCUPY ONE OF THE CHOKE POINS OPPOSITE AN ISLAND FROM WHERE NAVY CRAFT WERE RECEIVING HEAVY ENEMY FIRE. THIS INNER CHANNEL REPRESENTS MAJOR CHALLENGE TO THE CONVOY MAKING IT WAY UP TO PHNOM PENH. FURTHERMORE, ONE OF THE FRIENDLY POSITIONS EVEN FURTHER DOWN THE MEKONG AND CLOSER TO THE VIETNAMESE PORBER HAD FALLEN DURING THE NIGHT.

2. GENERAL PALMER AND I DISCUSSED THE SITUATION TOGETHER AND FELT THAT WE HAD TO PUT THE RESPONSIBILITY SQUARELY ON THE KHMER ARMED FORCES FOR OPENING UP THE MEKONG RIVER, BECAUSE UNLESS THIS CAN BE DONE WE FEEL
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IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT FOR THE PRESIDENT AND THE ADMIN-

ISTRATION TO REQUEST SUPPLEMENTAL ASSISTANCE FOR CAMBODIA. IT APPEARS TO US THAT IT WOULD MAKE LITTLE SENSE TO ASK THE LEGISLATORS TO AUTHORIZE ADDITIONAL MILITARY AND CIVIL ASSISTANCE TO CAMBODIA IF IT CANNOT REACH THE CAPITAL. ONLY IF MEKONG SECURITY HAS BEEN TESTED BY A CONVOY WHICH COULD NOT MAKE IT MIGHT TEMPORARY LARGE-SCALE AIRLIFT TO PHNOM PENH BE CONSIDERED BY US AUTHORITIES. EVEN THEN, WE CONCLUDED, THIS WOULD HAVE TO BE A RELIEF OPERATION ONLY UNTIL MEKONG WAS OPENED. IN SHORT, KEEPING THE RIVER OPEN WAS CRUCIAL TO THE SURVIVAL OF THE KHMER REGIME.

4. AS RESULT OF OUR DELIBERATIONS, GENERAL PALMER INSISTED THAT AN EFFORT--EVEN ON A REDUCED SCALE--BE MADE TODAY.

5. IN ORDER TO INCREASE THE CHANCES OF THE FIRST CONVOY REACHING PHNOM PENH, THE ORIGINAL 10-VESSEL CONVOY WAS CUT BACK TO THE TWO WELL-SHIELDED AMMO BARGES. IF THEY MAKE IT, IT WOULD HAVE FAVORABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT UPON KHMER MILITARY BY SIGNALLING THAT THE ENEMY HAD NOT CLOSED THE RIVER TO TRAFFIC AND THAT FRIENDLY FORCES COULD CONTAIN THE KC, AND ALSO UPON RIVER PILOTS AND CREWS WAITING TO TAKE THE SHIPS UP THE MEKONG TO PHNOM PENH, WHOSE MORALE AND WILLINGNESS TO SAIL HAS BEEN UNDERMINED BY SCARE STORIES ABOUT KC MIGHT ON THE MEKONG.

6. IF THE TWO BARGES MAKE IT TO PHNOM PENH WITH POWERFUL KHMER AIR FORCE SUPPORT, AND UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS, WE HOPE THAT ANOTHER CONVOY CAN BE QUICKLY ORGANIZED BY FLYING SOME RIVER PILOTS BACK FROM PHNOM PENH TO TAKE ANOTHER GROUP OF VESSELS UP THE MEKONG. WE HOPE BY THAT TIME TO HAVE MORE EFFECTIVE ORDNANCE TO SILENCE SOME KEY ENEMY POSITIONS ON CHOKE POINTS.

7. GENERAL HUNT, DEPUTY COMMANDER OF USSAG, IS IN RADIO CONTACT WITH THE SMALL CONVOY TRYING TO PUNCH ITS WAY THROUGH TODAY. WE WILL BE IN TOUCH WITH DEPARTMENT AFTER RESULTS OF THIS INITIAL EFFORT ARE CONFIDENTIAL

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FULLY KNOWN (I.E. WHETHER CONVOY REACHED PHNOM PENH) BUT DO NOT EXPECT HAVE THIS INFO UNTIL COB WASHINGTON TIME.
DEAN

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